DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 284 613 JC 870 341

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TITLE	How Successful Financial Aid Outreach Is Developed and Run.
PUB DATE	[85]
NOTE	15p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Community Colleges; Educational Finance; Outreach Programs; Program Descriptions; *Student Financial Aid; *Student Financial Aid Officers; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS	Northern Virginia Community College

ABSTRACT

The Office of Financial Aid at the Alexandria Campus of Northern Virginia Community College is effectively providing service for a population of over 11,000 students each quarter, making and maintaining more than 1,500 combined initial and mortified awards packages and processing over 2,000 applications during the academic year. The philosophy of the program is to "challenge conformity in improving services," and its basic approach is to realize and maintain the personal human aspect in one-to-one relationships. The strategies used by the office were developed, with flexibility and constant adjustments, to be appropriate to the college's constituency and setting. The program uses a faculty and staff involvement approach to communicate financial aid information to students and their families. Faculty and staff are involved in numerous ways such as writing and phoning students referred to their divisions by the financial aid office and meeting with students and their parents in groups or on an individual basis. Student information teams, made up of enrolled students, alumni and community groups, and area schools also play a major role in outreach efforts. The aid office also sponsors occasional special events, participates in recruiting activities, and is involved in open visitation days and special financial aid days throughout the year. The work of the aid office is facilitated by the use of computers, collaboration with the college's public relations office, and the use of videotapes and disks to aid communication. The aggressive strategies used by the office provide a gateway to students' quest to finance their higher education. (EJV)

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How Successful Financial Aid Outreach is Developed and Run

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HOW SUCCESSFUL FINANCIAL AID OUTREACH IS DEVELOPED AND RUN

by

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SUCCESS STORY

The Office of Financial Aid at the Alexandria Campus, NORTHERN VIRGINIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE, is a success. Our staff is enthusiastic and innovative; and the office is effective on campus and in its outreach efforts. It is visible on campus and to the community. In short, our office is a model aid operation.

With a staff of four and student assistants, we are effectively providing service for a population of over 11,000 students on our campus each quarter. We make and maintain more than 1,500 combined initial and mortified awards packages and process over 2,000 applications during the academic year. We also provide full service to our areas of community responsibility.

Boastful? We think not. A short observation of our office tells you something about financial aid services to come. The office's attitude, immediate helpfulness, and atmosphere brought a creative outpouring, we believe, is second to none.

THE PAPER'S INTENT

The intent of this paper is to offer an aggressive financial aid program that gets results. It introduces a successful process used at the two year college level which embraces extensive involvement and communication. The paper is further intended to detail accomplishments by our office staff and Campus. Presented in a form that can easily be replicated, it includes our successful experiences with paricular:

- Attitudes and Philosophy
- Goals and Objectives
- Assumptions
- General Approaches

Crucial developmental and operational principles are also included,

Crucial developmental and operational principles are also included, along with brief comments for the future.

HOW TO GET THE JOB DONE - A SERIES OF SUCCESSFUL EXPERIENCES

With these attitudes it was not difficult to reach the kind of one-on-one personal relationships needed for success. Efforts become alive. Exciting. Success breeds keenness into our approaches.

All in all, our efforts have resulted in a financial aid service that stands out today among America's finest. Consequently, a resurgence that began in our office has reached a maturity that is winning acclaim from area colleagues.

Building Attitudes

The excitement that comes with reviewing our success has as its origin the overall office philosophy. Simply stated, that philosophy is to "challenge conformity--in improving our services." We see ourselves not just as counselor educators, but as a team of creative financial aid thinkers who happen to be counselor educators. But more is needed. Realizing and maintaining the personal, human aspect in our strive for a one-on-one relationships of communication as a basic approach to aid delivery is the foundation we seek to build upon.

The satisfaction we feel when we see our students receiving adequate service is what keeps us "plugging" away. We have successfully starved of any cynicism or bitterness, and moved on to try things that we believe better serve our young people on the campus and in the community.

We remember that education is a valuable commodity in today's society. And that there are thousands of youth who don't get a fair chance at education because they think that they can't afford it. We remember too, that when students drop out of school, they may drop out of society.

We all agree, that there is more to attaining a successful financial aid operation, than running the office by objectives. We feel that the human aspects of any operation is important; even as important as good planning.

This means that a good relationship--communicating effectively with students and their families, the larger college family, and just as importantly, with the total community, counts as much as any other effort toward aid office effectiveness. We fully realize too, that ultimate success sometimes comes with just the right combination of climate, philosophy, and staff.

How We Developed an Operational Model

We had to respond to a new demand for improved delivery in the aid

office. We knew that it was necessary in some way, to show the Campus's concern for individual students and their families.

During our formative period, we found that there was essentially no operational model too go by. It was necessary for us to develop approaches and strategies appropriate to our own setting and constituency. What gave us direction was a set of ideas whose practical expression, we realized, would necessarily be tailored to the campus and community. Constant adjustments and flexibility was also necessary.

At the same time, the staff realized that ideas come in all shapes and sizes, good and bad, large and small. We had to depend on the quality of the ideas. We gave them careful care and feeding. We found it necessary too, to guard against the lost of good ideas in today's load of facts and statistics. But we were able to save the flow of steady and uninterrupted supply of fresh ideas and to develop from these, innovative techniques. One of the major challenges we faced was to sustain the idea flow, which helped us discover better ways to get things done.

Effective program approaches had to be direct, to the point, and feasible. Plans included sound reasons to improve aid service, strong rationales, viable assumptions, and well stated problems to be solved.

Problems Resolved

Happily our Dean and Provost not only supported our strive to improve our aid service, but forthrightly encouraged us. They gave us the time and freedom we needed to work out problems. They also allowed us to have reasonable autonomy needed. With this needed encouragement and support, our staff was able to move beyond any frustrations and forge a strong commitment for action.

This meant we were able develop clear and defined goals and measurable objectives that were directly related to an effective financial aid service to both the campus and to the community. Written goals help tremendously. They are:

*Design improved program to better carry out our Campus' mission on a daily basis

*Reach all students in the area of operation with information regarding types of aid available--such as gifts, loans, work study programs, and various sources of aid for college, from the federal and private levels; and impress the importance of completing accurately aid related forms

*Increase counseling and debt management assistance for all potential students

*Expand the office's particular ability to reach those students who are poorly informed about educational financial assistance

*Bring schools and community organizations together to get more involvement in financial aid information dissemination

*Increase parental and other involvements in financial aid information delivery

*Lessen the effect of a staff shortages

*Utilize computer support fully

*Provide more effective workshops for office staff, campus personnel, and community representatives

*Work closely together with established college and campus articulation and outreach programs

*Raise enthusiasm of faculty and staff, alumni, community groups, and other interested persons

*Expand research capabilities -- bring together area resource persons to study major financial aid issues, concerns and service needs of the financial aid constituency; and find ways to improve communication skills

*Replace "dirty" with "respectable" regarding educational financial need

Assumptions

For us to attain a successful outreach program we theorize that our office must meet at least two criteria. These criteria are: Everyone on campus from the chief administrative officer to the newest student must have positive and supportive attitude towards aid information spreading and communicating that information; and the atmosphere on campus must be such that all students feel comfortable in discussing and receiving aid. We are convinced that unless these conditions are met, communicating information to the campus and the community can be only minimally attained.

It is further assumed that the administration's commitment must be comprehensive, and the office staff include at least sufficient staff, while utilizing fully student assistants. The assumption includes too, that it is necessary, especially in outreach efforts, to stress need-based financial assistance, and no-need grants based purely on academic promise.

And included is the fact that outreach representative need the authority to make tentative aid decisions on the spot. This is to assure that students would not fail to consider higher education because of what they may consider a lack of immediate funds in their particular situations. No-need grants are needed to encourage those highly qualified students from families with better incomes, who would not likely attend college if such grants were not available.

In our approach, it is necessary for us to make additional assumptions. Some of them are:

Quality aid service starts with solid fundamentals;

Success comes with quality service;

Basic standards are necessary;

Our daily operational objectives are to:

Communicate financial aid and related form completion information to students and their families in our area of responsibility, with a concentration on groups who have high financial needs;

Serve as special advisors, particularly where meeting college costs and debt management are concerned;

Work with interested groups to promote cooperative efforts towards better aid communication;

Involve parents in aid communication;

Work with the campus family in aid delivery efforts

Provide inservice training programs for our campus and interested community individuals and groups; and

Keep daily record for research purposes.

Involvement Approach

Many of us in the profession know that invention, imagination, performance, and orchestration are the heart of aid counseling and aid communication. We also prize the discretion usually allowed us. And, we find necessary to move beyond frustrations to forge a full commitment for action.

Cooperation and collaboration and involvement are the key ingredients needed. Communication is the mode. Information sharing is the process. Communicating aid information to those whom we wish to reach is influenced by our attitudes and states of mind. The "can do" spirit in dealing with an art of such complexity, still goes a long way towards success in providing aid information.

Effective aid delivery to the "total service clientel" is the unit used to measure our success or failure. The approach is one that fostered involvement by not only the faculty and staff, but students, potential students and their families, and the community. The goal strategies used are those we determined to have real impact.

Outreach Relationships

One of the most important needs for good human relations is to let everyone concerned know at the beginning, that the aid staff is "obsessed" with providing excellent service. To be progressive and creative is a big part of it all.

Staffs such as ours, with a total of at least four professionals and nonprofessionals, one staff member should be designated as "Senior Outreach Representative". Generally, outreach persons are more effective if they represent the cross ethnic backgrounds of the community. Our entire aid staff is kept aware of current outreach-related activities in all areas and maintain excellent relationships with currently enrolled students, alumni, and other interested persons and groups.

The Senior Outreach Representative is not only responsible for areas that have been designated as having a large number of disenfranchised and impoverished families. It is true that representatives need to be particularly aware of areas with suspected high educational financial needs, and should encourage and assist those living there. But not to the detriment of other students.

Our staff is prepared to tell students and their parents what admissions possibilities are and to give strong indications of the financial assistance which students can expect. The aid administrator and the registrar work closely together. A representative from our office attend all major outreach functions and accompany campus recruiters to high schools and other functions in the area.

Faculty and Support Staff "Spread the Word"

We knew that our campus and outreach efforts were a success when we realized the excellent faculty and staff participation in the program. The one factor which played a most important role in campus participation was the visible reinforcement by the administration. This included the administration's support in the form of recognition to faculty and staff for their part in the efforts.

There are numerous of ways which the campus family helps in "spreading the financial aid word." Some of these ways are:

Writing and phoning students referred to their division by our office;

Meeting with students interested in majors offered by their division on special recruiting and financial aid visitation days;

Meeting with students and their parents referred on individual bases;

Accompanying aid staff on visits, particularly to high schools that enroll large numbers of students with high financial needs;

Accompanying aid staff to off-campus meetings planned by our staff and office of admissions;

Attending "career days" in our area high schools that enroll large numbers of students with high financial needs;

Serving as aid information coordinators for their divisions;

Assisting to identifying sources for scholarship and work-study for students in their divisions;

Attending financial aid orientations; and

Showing aid video tapes during classroom presentation.

Enrolled Students

Student Information Teams play a major part in our efforts towards getting information to enrolled students and to the community. We organized the Teams to work directly with our senior outreach representative.

The team includes current aid recipients and other interested students. They are made up of essentially blacks and other minorities. Scholarship winners also serve on the teams. Team member use a handbook and brochures prepared by the aid office. They are especially helpful by adding a "personal attention" relationship while doing the following:

Helping with visiting students during on-campus career days;

Going with staff, support staff and faculty to off-campus aid and recruitment meetings;

Conducting tours for students and their parents who visit our campus individually;

Conducting special, individual, and group sessions on completion of aid related forms;

Participating in telephone and letter-writing to provide information to individuals in the community;

Visiting former high schools during vacation periods and at other times, to discuss the College and availability of financial assistance;

Contacting friends who may need financial assistance;

Helping with orientation of new students; and encouraging other students and campus groups to help with spreading information about financial aid.

Collaboration with Alumni and other Interested Community Persons

Since the over twenty years our College has been in existence we have developed a cadre of alumni and other interested persons who help us get the financial aid word out. These "friends" are invaluable in contacting prospective students and helping with information-related meetings. They have been helpful too, in providing personal contact with families of student who may need financial assistance by writing, telephoning, and visiting them. Our senior outreach representative meets with this important group periodically to ensure continuity.

Good Working Relationships with Area Schools

Our files reflected high schools with the largest number of student most likely to need financial assistance to attend college. The senior outreach representative periodically visit these schools. All high schools in our area are visited at some point during the school year.

It is necessary to maintain close relationships with principals, teachers, and counselors. This is a way to ensure the best possible access to high need students. Every effort is made to represent our office at local area breakfasts, luncheons, and other meetings held for these school officials. On-campus workshops and seminars for them are also held.

We plan high school visits well in advance. Once the ground work is laid with appropriate officials, students identified in our files are sent notices about upcoming visits. Students are encouraged to contact the school counselor about attending the meetings. A notation is made in the files indicating whether the student attended or not. Follow-up letters are written to those who attend the meeting as well as the counselor who made the arrangements.

Special Events

The aid office sponsors occasional special events and our staff participates when counselors and registrar conduct special recruiting events on campus. This includes transfer days, minority recruitment days, career days, and other special occasion days. Usually these meeting are held right on campus, but occasionally conducted in restaurants, community centers, churches, and housing developments.

We make a point of inviting all students listed in our files to these meeting, along with parents, high school officials, alumni and community contact persons; and certain community leaders. Faculty members, administrators, and students play a large part in these programs. The tenth grade is not too early for students to began attending such meetings to become aware of financial assistance available for college.

Typical Special Program -- On and Off Campus

They basically include:

Light refreshments while staff members and student team members socialize with visitors;

A brief financial aid videotape or slide presentation that provides information on how students pay for college, and a look at various sources of financial aid for college from the federal and private levels;

A presentation by an interested faculty, campus support person, or member of the aid staff on the availability of financial assistance,

and an introduction to the types of aid available, such as gifts, loans, and work-study programs;

An 18-minute College Scholarship Service videotape "Paying for College", or a panel discussion by outstanding students who are receiving financial assistance, on how they are paying for college.

A group discussions with parents and high school officials held in one section and students in another location. Opportunity is provided during this time for individual questions and answers.

Discussions are led by aid office staff about the importance of investigating leads and being creative in discovering financial aid sources, and how to use the assistance to fill in financial gaps. Concurrent discussion are also led by staff members on family strategies for meeting college costs, and the efficacy and fiscal soundness of financial aid assistance.

The program is never for more than one and one-half hour. High school counselors are consulted to help schedule the best time for these meetings. Community contact persons are consulted regarding area habits and attitudes in determining the best time of day and week to appeal to the largest number of prospects. Generally, we have found the most popular times are:

Early evening--a "desert meeting";

Immediately after school--a soft drink and cookie party;

Breakfast time--coffee and cocoa--everyone is fresh, and students and parents can attend the meeting on their way to school or work.

The closing session usually consists of a brief general summary for all, followed by a question-and answer period

Other Campus Visits

Research has shown that one of the most effective ways to reach potential students for any reason is to have them and their parents visits the campus. This is equally true when an attempt is being made to connect with them regarding information about financial aid.

At our College, we have open visitation days throughout the year and students and parents are welcome at any time. In addition, special financial aid days are planned. These days are most effective when the College pays expenses, including transportation and meals. Better results are produced when they are held during the week when classes are in session. However, logistics often necessitate holding them on Saturdays.

Students are sent personal invitations well in advance, indicating that the days are special ones just for them. Invitations are also sent to parents indicating that "parent" sessions are held for them.

Our typical visitation program includes:

Check-in with refreshments:

Campus tours led by Student Aid Teams members or members of the aid staff:

General session on financial aid and admission, and advice on when and how to apply for aid and what colleges look for when considering a student's application for assistance.

Student panel on the availability of financial aid;

Remarks by selected faculty members or administrators;

Parents meeting with top campus administrators or individual faculty members when practical;

Academic area meetings with faculty coordinators; and

Lunch provided by campus budget.

Computer Use

The computer makes record keeping much easier. Names of potential students with high needs from schools, community areas, and other locations, are obtained and placed in files and processed in different ways: by sex, class in school, community areas, academic background, financial need, desired program of study, extracurricular, and other interests.

Excellent sources to potential students with suspected high financial need are campus deans, registrars, counselors, departments heads, support staff, faculty, division chairpersons, and coordinators of student activities. Other sources are club sponsors, alumni and community contact persons, student recruiters, and various other interested campus personnel.

The computer can be used to sort lists into almost any conceivable criteria -- such as interests, home addresses, zip codes, programs of study, academic levels, and many other possibilities. Additional lists can be provided by organizations, especially those interested in helping students finance their way through college. Some others lists may be made from inquiries by phone or letter; high school visits; college day programs; campus visits; and student, faculty, and staff; and alumni and community contacts persons' referrals.

Lists obtained can be refined by noting which prospects have indicated an interest in the College and financial need by returning a direct mail card, attending a visitation day, or making other contacts. Special community contacts can are on this file. Special needs are identified and prospects are sorted by interest areas.

Our principal use of the file system is for direct mail contact, but our outreach representatives uses it to notify students about forthcoming visitation days and high school visits and college days or nights in the students' community areas, or to call them. We indicate in the files which students are admitted, applied for financial aid,

and finally enrolled. The notes are used effectively for research purposes. This way, we determine the most effective aid communication efforts.

Publications

Our office collaborate with the Colleges's public relations office, and the office of Student Aid and Benefits, screening carefully publications, and making recommendation to ensure the inclusion of financial aid information. The College and Campus have special publications targeted towards student with financial need. As with all other types of outreach activities, these publications present a positive approach to financial aid that is available, and is always factual and truthful. The aid Aid Office periodically publishes an innovative newsletter which is widely circulated on campus and in the community.

Videotapes and Discs

These mediums of aid communication are excellent. The College has a production for recruitment, and helps us produce the mediums into a specialized effort for communicating information about financial aid.

A video or disc production is most effective when kept short. They should not be more than ten minutes long. We find those with a hard-hitting impact with music and rapidly changing scenery are most effective. Other effective techniques are the brief testimonials by campus recipients of financial assistance concerning their experience with our office and receiving aid.

We use these productions at meeting for groups during the communication process, and copies are made available to high school counselors and librarians willing to allow students to view the information at their schools and communities. Evidence indicate, that usually on-campus productions of communication tapes and discs are the most effective. Most of the time, we can provide our own taping and distribution more effectively than by using an outside agency.

CRUCIAL DEVELOPMENTAL AND OPERATIONAL PRINCIPLES

It must be assumed that comprehensive administrative support, well trained, experienced, and sufficient staff are basic requirements for effective financial aid delivery. Personalization and simple goals are imperative.

Listed below are working principles that can make aid offices' efforts successful. All involved must:

*Appreciate the necessity to "take special steps" to make things happen

*Appreciate the necessity for the involvement of faculty and

support staff, students, potential students and their families, and the community, e,g. productivity through people and team work

*Appreciate that ultimate aid success comes with with just the right combination of climate, philosophy and staff

*Appreciate the importance of outreach cooperation, collaboration, and involvement with with alumni, and other interested community persons and groups

*Impress upon those associated with outreach efforts the importance of the mission, e.g. "quality aid service to all students" in the area of responsibility

*Appreciate "effective communication connection" with all elements concerned

*Appreciate having enough freedom from the administration to be "innovative"

*Appreciate the necessity to, in some way, establish a one-on-one relationship with all concerned

*Convey the message and image that staff and their representatives are strong aid advocates, interested, friendly, unhurried, and caring

*Appreciate the importance of being aggressive, creative, flexible with the ability to adjust, and "obsessed" with providing excellent service

*Strive to build a total aid information sharing environment

*Project the college's concern for individual students and their families

*Appreciate the importance of aid planning and research

AID OFFICES CAN MEET THEIR RESPONSIBILITIES

As individual offices' personnel look towards the next five years in their "lives", one goal should be high on the agenda. That goal is to reach all students with the necessary financial aid information and effectively communicate the information to them.

Collectively, aid offices throughout the country can not only help shape the future of higher education, but also the future of our country. We can make a difference in the lives of millions of children. We must continue to explore avenues for success. The concern of reaching students, all students, who may need financial assistance must be addressed adequately. We must continue to be farsighted.

If each office does not do its part, the chances are that many more poor children will not get a chance to experience higher education. They will never worry about passing an examination; know the pleasure of solving a difficult problem in math nor in life; nor know the

pleasure of reading with understanding. They will never experience the exaltation of intellectual growth.

Each aid office can play a big part in helping to make our children of today -- "leaders of tomorrow". This is what we attest to be doing now. This is what we are charged with doing. These very children will be the ones who will help shape our future. This is because they will determine our resources and therefore the quality and breadth of our way of life.

Aid offices must make plans which will make possible an extended future for many who might not have had a chance to go to college. Together, we must make a most aggressive move towards "getting the aid word" out.

Collective thinking, collective planning, and collective action are the three great essentials to providing improved financial information to students in the future. All students. Black, Asian, Hispanic, and American Indian, as well as white. One by one, and in groups. But the task must begin at home. With each individual aid office.

Our aid service aggressiveness will be the gateway to students' quest to finance their higher education. A gateway to educating all of our students. And, for them, on to tomorrow's opportunities!

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